The Healthy and Unhealthy Commitments in the President’s Budget

Silver Spring, MD (February 11, 2016). As Catholic leaders and disciples of Jesus, we are encouraged by many of President Obama’s requests regarding clear moral issues, such as the environmental crisis, poverty and families, income inequity, and global development aid. Yet, we take a clear moral stand against the requested reduction in immigration and refugee assistance, disaster assistance, and State Department funding; as well as the increase in Department of Defense funding and the morally tragic gap in funding between military approaches versus diplomacy, development, and peacebuilding.

Pope Francis has been crystal clear about our need to address the environmental crisis, prioritize the poor and marginalized, create an economy of inclusion, invest in peacemaking and significantly reduce weapons. “We know very well that the federal budget is a moral document, especially as it articulates our national priorities,” Very Rev. James Greenfield, OSFS, said. “We are grateful that, in many areas, this proposed budget addresses the deep needs of our nation, especially those who are the most poor and needy among us. Yet, there are some critical areas, especially in terms of caring for our immigrant neighbors and for seeking peace diplomatically instead of deploying more arms that beckon our urgent attention. Here, we can do better. Our brothers and sisters are counting on us; we can’t let them down.”

The Healthy
This budget request offers a lot of promise in a number of key areas. The attention to the environmental crisis is appreciated with increasing investments in a cleaner transportation system, research and adoption of clean energy, water sustainability, and the Green Climate Fund to help developing countries as well as decreasing tax benefits for coal, oil and gas. The attention to those persons living in poverty and families is greatly affirmed with expansion of quality child care, head start programs, preschool grants, tax credits, housing vouchers, youth job training, paid leave, and access to mental health care. The attention to the enormous wealth and income gap is also appreciated with the closing of tax loopholes for the wealthy, imposing a financial fee on large financial firms, and taking steps to ensure the wealthy pay their fair share. The attention to some particular peacebuilding programs is appreciated, with increases for the U.S. Institute of Peace and U.S. Agency for International Development, as well as decreases in foreign military assistance from the State Department.

The Unhealthy
However, this budget illustrates significant concerns with the priorities and commitments. Specifically, the budget request decreases funding for Migration and Refugee Assistance
and International Disaster Assistance. We know too well those persons suffering as refugees from Central America, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. We must do better for these persons. Further, the overall funding request for the Department of State was decreased to $50 billion, while we face significant conflicts and cycles of violence around the world. In contrast, the funding request for the Department of Defense, i.e. the military, increased to $583 billion. Yes, the numbers are $583 billion vs. $50 billion, so we spend over 11 times more on military approaches than on diplomacy, development, and peacebuilding approaches to conflict. This is a moral tragedy in itself which all persons, especially Catholic leaders should be consistently mobilizing to transform. For instance, in the response to ISIL, the military request calls for $7.5 billion, even though the “war on terror” approach has increased terrorism and similar groups. Meanwhile, much less is requested to the State Department for transforming this conflict in a sustainable way; and for the two main peacebuilding accounts overall only $30 million (Complex Crisis Fund) and $21.5 million (Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization) have been requested.

Yet, it’s not just an issue for our approach outside the U.S. The key departments which can directly assist the poor and marginalized in the U.S. are also woefully underfunded. For instance, the requests for the Department of Education ($69 billion), the Department of Health and Human Services ($77 billion), the Department of Housing and Urban Development ($38 billion), and the Department of Labor ($12 billion) have some impact on the poor and marginalized. Looking at the overall discretionary budget, the Department of Defense still accounts for over 50% of this budget. Yet, the Department of Defense amount doesn’t even include the nuclear weapons programs ($13 billion) found elsewhere (Dept. of Energy) in the discretionary budget. As a specific comparison, the amount of money spent on just three unmanned surveillance planes – $1.6 billion – could repair Flint, Michigan’s water infrastructure.

We pray and commit to lifting up the healthy trends in this budget request and to working fervently to resist and transform the unhealthy elements, which degrade our society and global community. We particularly call on the Catholic community and leaders to join us.

-30-

The Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) supports and offers resources for U.S. leaders of Catholic men’s religious institutes. CMSM promotes dialogue and collaboration on issues of religious life as well as peace and justice issues with major groups in church and society. There are more than 17,000 religious priests and brothers in the United States.